New Curricular Categories for the Future: University of North Dakota School of Communication

LANA RAKOW

In summer 1994 Lana Rakow became Director of the University of North Dakota School of Communication and Associate Dean of the College of Fine Arts and Communication, returning to her alma mater after almost twenty years. She had earned B.A. and M.A. degrees from UND, then practiced public relations and taught in the Journalism Department at Franklin College in Franklin, Indiana. Her Ph.D. degree was earned from the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana. Prior to returning to UND, Rakow was a faculty member, chair of the Communication Department, and then Associate Vice Chancellor for Undergraduate Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. The author or editor of three books and numerous other publications, she is most widely known as a feminist scholar, and in more recent years, as an advocate of curriculum reform.

A SCHOOL POISED FOR CURRICULAR CHANGE

The University of North Dakota School of Communication was poised for a significant curricular change when I arrived as its director in July of 1994. The School historically has had a highly visible leadership role in the state of North Dakota, particularly with newspapers and broadcast stations in the state. Rather than limiting the possibility for change, however, its visibility joined other factors in making conditions for change favorable. First, the program has been integrated for the past ten years when the former Departments of Speech and Journalism merged under the leadership of then-Director Vernon Keel. This adminis-trative integration produced five traditional "career path" majors: journalism, broadcasting,

advertising, public relations, and speech. Second, the size of the program makes large-scale and risk-taking change possible, while unstable and uneven student enrollments made change necessary. The program has 14 full-time faculty positions and about 400 pre-communication and accepted undergraduate communication majors and about 25 masters students. Number of majors and faculty lines in speech have dropped to dangerously low levels under the weight of emphasis on mass communication career paths favored by the state media and by the accrediting requirements of the Accrediting Council for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. At the same time, enrollments in the other four majors have shifted unpredictably, with journalism—the most politically supportable major—also suffering from low enrollments. Though the School has been spared serious financial cutbacks (it did lose a faculty position dedicated to debate in the spring), the financial picture of the University made it clear that the School would need to find a way to operate its curriculum with existing faculty lines and with fewer part-time faculty.

A third factor supporting curriculum change was the School's move in the previous year from the College of Arts and Sciences to a new administrative home in what became the College of Fine Arts and Communication, the result of reorganization by a new university administration. The Director now reports to the Dean of a small unit with five programs. And a final factor came about two years earlier when the School was not successful in its bid for reaccreditation from the Accrediting Council for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. Loss of accreditation brought a painful re-examination of the School, its funding, and its curriculum. The School's faculty spent the next two years discussing major curriculum reform but last spring moved to shore up its traditional curriculum rather than making a drastic change.

THE NEW CURRICULUM

When I became the School's director, it was clear to me that we would have to either cut back the number of majors we offered or streamline the curriculum to one. We were spreading ourselves too thin by requiring separate, lock-step programs with little flexibility for students and little ability on our part to respond to a changing world of communication industries, careers, and social issues. Eliminating one or two majors would mean losing speech communication, an intellectually unsound cut, and possibly journalism, a politically unsound cut. The advantages of one intellectually and pragmatically integrated curriculum were easy to argue.

The new curriculum (see Appendix) streamlines our five into one: communication. Rather than organizing courses around career paths, courses are organized around what we see as the three most important communication issues of these times: community, information, and technology. The three new organizing categories are not intended as givens but rather as subjects for discussion, investigation, and application. Students have flexibility in designing their own majors, with faculty approval, by choosing courses from several levels of each category.

This new curriculum is both mission driven and assessment driven. Our new mission statement and our goals for student learning set out the intellectual integration of communication that our curriculum reflects. The mission statement (see Appendix) establishes the special focus of our program, understanding how information processes and communication technologies affect and can benefit a diversity of local and global communities. It describes our broad notion of professional education: preparing undergraduate students for careers as ethical communicators with a broad understanding of contemporary communication issues and with skills that are adaptable to a variety of contexts. It states our value system as a faculty and School: we take a particular responsibility to serve those who historically have had less access to means of expression and participation.

GOALS FOR STUDENT LEARNING

The twelve goals for student learning (see Appendix), which students will be required to demonstrate in a senior portfolio course, will serve as a guide for students planning their major. Even so, a student who chooses to do so will be able to design a major that resembles any of our traditional majors or one that prepares her or him for the flexibility to move across old career paths or into one yet unknown. Either way, our students should leave us as thoughtful and accomplished communicators who can take a leadership role assessing and addressing the communication issues of the future.

THE RESPONSE TO THE ISSUE-ORIENTED CURRICULUM

How is the new curriculum being received? So far, the response has been overwhelmingly positive. As we began our discussions, the only hesitation came initially from some faculty who were concerned about the reactions of the School's alumni and of media professionals. But as we talked to these constituents and others, alumni and media professional agreed that new times and financial constraints warranted new ways of doing business. They are aware of the cross-overs between career paths that is common place for communication professionals; they argued in favor of students learning general skills of research, writing, and interpersonal relations rather than specialized skills; they recognize a changing world of communication issues and industries that require thoughtful analysis and flexibility from our graduates. Students are looking forward to the opportunity to take courses that once were out of their reach because their specialized majors were overly prescribed.

My colleagues from other programs have greeted the idea behind the curriculum change with interest. It appears that many communication administrators recognize the need for major curricular change to respond to organizational changes related to mergers and downsizing and to social changes related to shifting communication careers and issues. We need new curricular categories if we are to respond to these external forces and to these opportunities. The beauty of organizing a curriculum around important issues rather than around careers or communication contexts is that such a curriculum both avoids the downfalls of our traditional organizational schemes and creates new opportunities. The pitfalls of our traditional curricular frameworks include intellectual fragmentation when students fail to study communication processes holistically, inefficient use of resources when programs proliferate specializations and separate departments, and a conflict of interest produced by trying to serve specific media industries and careers in the face of a university's responsibility to question and analyze. New opportunities are created by a curriculum that links undergraduate courses with the significant communication issues faced by society. Ironically most communication programs are "out of the loop" in their own universities and regions at a time when communication issues are major topics of discussion. The choice of community, information, and technology enable us to match our program's teaching, research, and service endeavors with the most important local and regional discussions about communication that so far have been taking place without us.

Making a major curriculum change means taking a risk, but not making major curriculum change involves a much greater risk, the risk of becoming irrelevant to our students, to the university, and to society. A curriculum matched to communication issues of our time period ensures not only that we are not irrelevant but also that we make a positive contribution to society. The University of North Dakota School of Communication has been in a position to take the risk ahead of many other programs, but we welcome other innovative curriculum designs that surely must come in the next few years.

APPENDIX

University of North Dakota School of Communication Mission
The University of North Dakota School of Communication takes a leadership role in the state of North Dakota through a comprehensive, integrated program of communication research, education, outreach, and application. Through its undergraduate and graduate programs, Communication Research Center, Native Media Center, Television Production Center, and KFJM public radio stations, it specializes in understanding how information processes and communication technologies affect and can benefit a diversity of local and global communities. It prepares undergraduate students for careers as ethical communicators with a broad understanding of contemporary communication issues and with skills that are adaptable to a variety of contexts. The school takes a particular responsibility to serve those who historically have had less access to means of expression and participation.

Goals for Student Learning
University of North Dakota School of Communication

- **Community:**
  1. To understand how *language* and communication *processes* create communities;
  2. To understand the role of community and *identity* in how individuals see the world and others see them;
  3. To understand the *interactions* of individuals, organizations, groups, and social movements and the conflicts and opportunities that can result;
  4. To use an ethical framework to *analyze and address* the communication problems and opportunities of individuals and groups.

- **Information:**
  1. To understand the diverse and changing ways we acquire, produce, and share *knowledge* about the world;
  2. To understand various kinds of *messages, stories, images and texts* and how and why they are constructed;
  3. To understand the role of *interpretation* in how we respond to messages and texts;
  4. To *research* and *create socially responsible* oral, written, and visual communication.

- **Technology:**
  1. To understand the *historical and contemporary context* (political, economic, legal, and social) of communication institutions and technologies;
  2. To understand the *consequences* for individuals and communities of the use and content of communication media;
  3. To understand *alternate possibilities* for having access to, using, and arranging communication technologies and institutions;
  4. To *use* communication technologies ethically in conventional as well as imaginative ways.

School of Communication Curriculum
University of North Dakota Communication Major
35 credits minimum-38 credits maximum required

• *Level E:* *1 credit required*

450- Senior Portfolio *F,S*

• *Level D:* *1-3 credits required*

337- Cooperative Education *F,S*
382- Practicum *F,S*
391- Individual Projects, Read. *F,S*
485- Internship *F,S*

Community	Information	Technology

• *Level C:* *12-15 credits required, Pre-Reqs Comm 102 or 103; minimum one course per column*

Community	Information	Technology
300- Comm & Society *F*	308- Argumentation *F*	302- Popular Culture *F*
301- Psychology of Comm *S*	361- Persuasion *S*	331- Survey of Broadcasting *S*
310- Comm & Diversity *S*	367- Classical, Modern Criticism *F*	406- Media Consequences & Effects *F*
325- Community Journalism *F,S*	404- Advertising & Society *F*	407- Comm Technologies & the Future *S*
401- Organizational Comm *S*	405- Social Implications of Inform. Society *F*	412- Comm Law *F*
402- International/Intercultural Comm *F*	410- Comm Research *S*	428- Media History *S*
403- Community Relations *F*	461- Political Comm *S*	490- Special Topics *(occasionally)*
490- Special Topics *(occasionally)*	490- Special Topics *(occasionally)*	

• *Level B:* *15-18 credits required, minimum of one course per column*

Community	Information	Technology
161- Fund of Public Speaking *F,S*	200- Writing for the Media *F,S*	204- Graphic Design *F,S*
201- Visual Comm *S*	221- Reporting *F*	226- Photo Imaging *F*
210- Interpersonal Comm *F,S*	202- Writing for Electronic Media *F*	304- Electronic Editing *S*
303- Principles of PR *F,S*	321- Advanced Journalistic Writing *S*	305- Publications *F*
341- Advertising Creative Strategy *F*	322- Editing *S*	306- Advertising Media Planning *S*
365- Small Group Discussion *S*	352- Writing for PR *S*	307- Videography *S*
	366- Business & Professional Speaking *F*	332- Fundamentals TV Production *F*

• *Level A:* *6 credits required*

102- Communication and the Human Community *F,S*   103- Information Technology and Social Change *F,S*